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Jane Austen's Unified Commonwealth: An Exploration of Illness

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Description
This paper deals with illnesses, real and imagined, in Jane Austen's world, and her writing as a means of coping with the sickness she witnessed and experienced herself. The paper explores "real" illness in the books and the remedies and healing, physical and mental, then contrasts these with the imagined illnesses in the later novels — and the role of the hypochondriac. Laughing at the these imagined illness perhaps functioned as a coping device as Jane, herself, became more ill and faced death.

Disciplines
Arts and Humanities

Comments
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"Sickness is a dangerous Indulgence at my time of life…(Letters 23-25 March 1817).

"I am a poor Honey at present…(26th.March 1817).

In her 1989 work, Aids and Its Metaphors, Susan Sontag shows how Rudolph Virclow, "the founder of cellular pathology" uses "political metaphors to talk about the body" as a 'republic' or 'unified commonwealth'" (6-7), rather than a temple, a factory or a fortress (8), all metaphors of the past that human beings have used to help come to terms with the notion of sickness. If one treats the body as a temple then no harm can come to the holy edifice. If a factory, the body can turn out products for the good of the whole society. If a fortress, one can fight against the invading sickness--how often do we hear of people "battling" cancer, as if the disease has invaded the fortress but the defender put up a fight? The term seems to provide comfort against a violent mirauder. To help explain Virclow's point about commonwealth, Sontag refers to organisms as being simply "multicellular"--citizened as it were (7 emphasis mine). If that organism succumbs to division, in simple terms lacking in harmony or balance, or existing as a non-unified commonwealth, it suffers, sickens and possibly dies.

Jane Austen's novels of course are renowned for their balance. Two titles, Pride and Prejudice, Sense and Sensibility, suggest a weighing of opposites, as do numerous examples of Austen's meticulously balanced prose. Austen characters achieve balance only after severe division. Something or somebody "infects" people and communities (Mansfield Park, Highbury) so that they become non-unified; certain elements must come together to be "healed". Harmony in Austen's characters' lives I interpret through Sontag's lens as the Eighteenth Century writer's observations that the body must heal itself from the split of fancy/reality, mind/body, good/evil.

Those characters who have attained that healing (the Crofts come to mind in Persuasion), or who, in the process of the novels achieve a balance (Elizabeth Bennett, Emma Woodhouse), are healthy, physiologically and physically. The unhealthy characters, whether imagining their illnesses or seriously suffering disease, or the aftermath of a fall in Louisa's case, betrayal in Marianne's, learn significant lessons from their suffering. Exploring the metaphor of illness in Austen's novels reveals that as the writer matures, witnesses suffering in others, and becomes seriously ill herself, the instances of words like "illness", "sickness", "invalid" proliferate. The novel Sanditon, broken off because of Austen's physical weakness, presents a riot of "the enjoyments of Invalidism" (418), quack cures, advertisements for medical doctors, and sheer fun at the expense of those who imagine themselves ill. Finally it seems that by writing about illness and the sick society of Sanditon, a society that attempts to build itself on the shifting foundations of health cures, Jane Austen comes to terms with her own divided commonwealth as her body fails her.

In her earliest novel[1] Northanger Abbey, Austen makes no reference to the word invalid, and only four references to being ill, or suffering from illness or having a physician attend. Isabella Thorpe, the mistress of hyperbole, worries that the healthy young Catherine Morland is ill when she takes "at least three hours" to dress ready for their outing (62). Seeing Catherine's distress on reading a letter, not knowing it is Isabella's, Henry hopes that none of her family is ill (203). But the main use of the metaphor of illness occurs when Austen cleverly directs it towards the burlesque of the gothic novel. Unlike all the other mothers of gothic heroines, Mrs.Morland did not die giving birth to Catherine, "as anybody might expect" (13); she is a healthy, sensible mother and the heroine herself, as a child, is active and energized, loving to roll down the green slope behind her home (14). At the Abbey, Catherine's love of Mrs.Radcliffe's

novels makes her see devious intent behind the sudden short illness of Henry' s mother, and her death during Eleanor's absence. "Catherine's blood ran cold with the horrid suggestions which naturally sprang from [Eleanor's] words" (186). Naturally Catherine springs to conclusions. In Catherine's over-active imagination, Mrs.Tilney's illness becomes "reputed;" the victim "languished out her days," was carried out of her room "in a state of well-prepared insensibility" (188). Henry of course explains his mother's death in purely rational terms: a bilious fever, a physician did attend, plus two others; Eleanor was absent but Henry and his brother and father were all present (196). Catherine feels shamed by Henry's words, "Remember that we are English, that we are Christians…"(197), and of course learns from her foolish fancy about illness and death.

In Austen's later novels, fancying oneself ill becomes a source of great comedy, and yet behind the nerves of Mrs. Bennet, the querulousness of that perfect valetudinarian, Mr.Woodhouse, and the selfishness of Mary Musgrove, nee Elliot, lies another dimension of the body as divided commonwealth. Subconsciously the characters know their deficiencies; they are not good in the sense of helping others, or interesting, even to themselves. None can bear being alone; all love to be the center of attention. Perhaps over the years they have realized that illness gives them some distinction. In Persuasion Mary sums up this notion perfectly: "You know my sore throats are worse than anyone's"(164). Sontag comments on the myth of sickness equating "interesting," quoting Novalis: "The ideal of perfect health is only scientifically interesting;" suggesting that what is really interesting is sickness, "which belongs to individualizing" (Illness 31). Perhaps to individualize themselves, Austen's famous hypochondriacs have perpetuated the notion of being ill, for only then can they earn the attention they believe rightly belongs to them.

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Unfortunately, in the process of exerting their egotism, as they retreat further from reality as Walton Lutz suggests (160), they can do harm to others.

In Pride and Prejudice, Mrs. Bennet, for example, is the foolish young girl whose youth and beauty had captivated Mr.Bennet, but whose "weak understanding and illiberal mind" nullified all affection for her (236). As Mr.Bennet retreats to his Latin and his study, over the years his wife's nerves become his "old friends" (5). Mrs.Bennet develops "nervous complaints" that everyone is well acquainted with and knows how to handle (113). The neurasthenia leads her into garrulousness and even vulgarity. A figure of fun, talking non-stop whilst denying she has pleasure in talking to anybody (113), nevertheless, this "absent" mother has the potential for damaging her daughters. After a particularly garrulous and foolish commentary on the virtues of country life from Mrs.Bennet, Elizabeth blushes for her (43), and trembles in case she further exposes her stupidity (45). Miss Bingley uses the teasing idea of Darcy's future mother-in-law to turn him against Elizabeth (46). Elizabeth realizes that her mother's lack of sense plays a part in Darcy's manipulation of Bingley's love away from Jane (187). Darcy himself in his infamous proposal struggles against the notion of the "family obstacles"--one reads mother-in-law there, and not simply difference in social status (189). Coming perilously close to ruining her daughters' chances at marriage, finally, and, because essentially the novel is a comedy, Mrs.Bennet's role is that of stock 18th.Century neuresthenic mother, and eventually does no harm.

The same may be said for the male version of hypochondriac, Mr.Woodhouse, in his relationship with his daughters in the later novel Emma. His comments on non-efficacy of sea visits, parties, and thin gruel, make up most of the hilarity of the novel. However, Emma's sister Isabella has inherited the tendency to "many fears and many nerves" (92), and that in a young wife rather than an old father is more disturbing. Thankfully John Knightley metes out some balance, urging his wife not to coddle him, just herself and the children (104), and certainly the

five little Knightleys seem unaffected. In fact the domestic happiness in his brother's home pushes Mr.Knightley to his proposal (432-3). Emma's marriage could have been harmed--her first thought is that it must be delayed until her father's death (435) and as he is so coddled, who knows how long that would take! As it is, she never visits the seaside because of her father's views: "I never had much opinion of the sea air…the sea is rarely of use to anybody" (101). Nor does she get to London: "Nobody is healthy in London, nobody can be…the air is so bad!"(104). Emma may never have got out at all to parties…"the sooner every party breaks up the better" (210), or arranged visits to the neighbors, especially if windows are left open (251), but she has learned to navigate the vagaries of her father's hypochondria. Nothing can be done "in a *moment*…everything deliberately arranged" (209). Cleverly, Emma steers him away from touchy subjects. When he enters into a philippic against inferior gruel, liking his a "nice smooth gruel, thin but not too thin", Emma knows "Here was a dangerous opening"(105), and works to avert it. Her eventual speedy move to marriage is successfully arranged only because of Mr. Knightley's willingness for harmony, to move to Hartfield (449), and his presence to allay the fears of poultry thieves (484) Again the *invalide imaginaire* has everyone centering around him--he is the focal point of all activities in Highbury--not simply because he is the most influential landowner but because his reputedly ill health is a matter of concern. Mr.Woodhouse himself says, "We invalids are privileged people" (57); and so should they be if the sickness is real. The egotism of the man reveals the lack within; the psyche is not whole; the invalidism is purely within his fancy.

The last novel, Persuasion, started during the first stages of Austen's own fatal illness, shows a darker picture of fancied illness. Mary, Anne's sister, is downright nasty. Perhaps because Anne was her husband's first choice, combined with the dreadful Elliot snobbery, Mary abuses Anne's caring and kindness. Berated for not visiting earlier, even though Mary was well

then, Anne cheerfully meets her sister's whining with "Well, you will soon be better now…You know I always cure you when I come" (38). Unlike the other Austen's hypochondriacs who reveal themselves through their speech and actions, Mary is delineated through not only the latter but comments from others and the narrator. Thus Charles to Anne: "I wish you could persuade Mary not to be always fancying herself ill" (44 emphasis added), and the narrator:

> INSET
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> While well and happy, and properly attended to, [Mary] had great good humor and excellent spirits; but any indisposition sunk her completely; she had no resources for solitude; and inheriting a considerable share of the Eliot self-importance, was very prone to add to every other distress that of fancying herself neglected and ill-used. (37 emphasis added)
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> END

The light comical touch for fancied illness in the other novels has given way to thoughtfulness, even empathy toward Mary. The use of the word "fancying" reveals a psychological understanding of Mary's behavior, but again her potential for harm is ever present.

Mary's egotism could harm Anne's spirits when Charles declares that Benwick is enamoured of her but Mary cannot believe Anne a greater attraction than herself (130). When Mary hears of Benwick's engagement to Louisa she cattily remarks "And this is the end, you see of Captain Benwick's being an admirer of yours" (165). Anne can shake off such sisterly venom because Louisa's engagement of course means Wentworth is "free and unshackled" (167). Even more damaging is Mary's hysteria after Louisa's fall. Her response epitomizes how far the egotism of hypochondria can separate oneself from reality and divide oneself from authentic feelings of concern for others. Her husband is prevented from helping the real invalid (109) and must pay attention to his wife's hysterical agitations (110). A crucial scene occurs when Mary

demands that she should stay to look after Louisa--"Why was she not to be as useful as Anne?" Impossible to answer. Anne submits to the "jealous and ill-judging claims of Mary" (115), and once again the imaginary invalid is kowtowed to and accommodated.

Many biographers of Jane Austen have suggested reasons for the presence of such hypochondria in Austen's novels. Marghanita Laski refers to Austen's brother Edward as being as much a hypochondriac as his mother (43). In his 1984 biography, John Halperin notes Mrs.Austen's hypochondria (124) and periodic bouts of invalidism (133) during the years 1801-1804. He refers especially to Mr.Woodhouse as "probably a male version of Mrs.Austen, though no one has noticed this before" (269), and Austen "worked off" the sufferings of living with hypochondria through Mr.Woodhouse (328). However, as the novels were read aloud to the family, it is hard to imagine that Austen, a dutiful daughter on all other accounts, would use her own mother as an obvious example within them. According to Mrs.Barrett, Austen herself claimed "it was her desire to create not reproduce" (quoted in Austen Leigh 210). For the period Halperin mentions there are no extant letters. In earlier letters any references to Mrs.Austen's illnesses are couched in terms of concern and caring. Where Halperin reads sarcasm and irritation, I read the usual English, stoic, Austen acceptance of one's lot--in Austen's case, the delegation of nursing her mother. For example, she writes 27-28 October 1798 of her mother bearing the journey to Steventon much better than expected and receiving "much comfort from a Mess of Broth, & the sight of Mr.Lyford who recommended her to take 12 drops of laudanum when she went to bed…."--presumably Nurse Jane administered the dose. Again, 1-2 December 1798, Austen writes of her mother having had "a tolerable night, and bids fair for a continuance in the same brilliant course of action to-day". Rather than laughing at the invalid, Austen shows her wit against the medical profession, a wit that is to shine brilliantly in Sanditon: "He [the doctor Mr.Lyford] wants my mother to look yellow and throw out a rash, but she will do neither."

A more serious note about illness enters the letters when Austen writes about her brother Henry. She is his sole nurse, witnessing his fevers, recoveries and relapses. The letter of 17-18 October 1815 has flashes of the usual Austen humor, but increasingly the alarm for Henry's survival becomes paramount. The letter reveals the "remedies" of 18th.Century medicine. Mr H. the apothecary is in attendance (one thinks of Mr.Perry in Emma). He bleeds twenty ounces from Henry in one night, and nearly as much the following morning. No wonder he is so ill…Henry "lives upon Medicine, Tea and Barley Water." Jane Austen thinks the complaint is "only Bile--but they say, the disorder must have originated in a Cold." Austen is working and writing in the same room with Henry. One begins to understand the increasing references to invalids in the novels that are being rewritten or polished during this period. One also begins to understand the fear of colds and "putrid sore throats" that crop up in Austen's letters and the novels--before the days of anti-biotics. John Halperin disagrees with some biographers, possibly Elizabeth Jenkins as the strongest proponent of the theory, that the stress of nursing Henry "undermined her own health" (282). Understanding now that Jane Austen suffered ultimately from Addison's Disease, could it be possible that Jane, in constant close contact with Henry contracted the miliary tuberculosis of the adrenal glands, an infection that her brother would recover from, but that would kill her?

No answer is possible of course. What is evident from Jane Austen's works is that as she matured as a writer, witnesses illness and death in reality, the seriousness of illnesses in her fiction overwhelms the humor of the fancied illness. As noted, Northanger Abbey has so few references to illnesses--most to do with burlesque of the gothic. The bright and sparkling Pride and Prejudice has 22 references related to sickness--clusters of words gather around Jane Bennet's deliberately arranged cold. In an age when people could die of infections from colds, and there was real fear of getting cold and wet, sitting in wet clothes, Mrs.Bennet, states the

opposite:" I am not at all afraid of her dying. People do not die of trifling little colds" (31). However, Jane's cold is accompanied by fever and acute headaches and becomes bad enough to call in Mr. Jones the apothecary who recommends draughts (35). The episode serves to show a number of points: a plot device of course to get the Bennet sisters to Netherfield; Mrs.Bennet's foolishness and lack of responsibility as a mother; perhaps more importantly, Elizabeth's glowing health and energy which will stand later in stark contrast to Miss.DeBurgh's "sickly constitution" (67). Elizabeth can laugh at the idea of such a mate for Darcy: "Sickly and cross.--Yes she will do for him very well…a very proper wife" (158). The point is that a sickly wife will not do for Darcy, nor for other male possible partners; Elizabeth sets a theme for future Austen heroines who become wives. Even the girls who are at one stage debilitated and enervated like Fanny in Mansfield Park, or who have lost their bloom like Anne in Persuasion, gain health and their looks so they can become suitably energized wives. Extending Sontag's metaphor: the women become citizens of the healthy commonwealth.

If Elizabeth sets this theme, Jane Bennet sets a pattern for girls whose potential husbands treat them in such a way they suffer, either physically or mentally. Jane is a physically healthy young woman. After Bingley's supposed rejection of her, Jane "struggled to support her spirits, [but] there were periods of dejection" (152). Only because Jane has such good sense and is so concerned for her friends does she not give into regrets which "must have been injurious to her own health" (227). In Emma, Jane Fairfax is not so strong mentally as Jane Bennet, and her physical health suffers from Frank Churchill's cruelty in his plan to keep their engagement secret. Body/mind split plays an important part in delineating Jane. Witnessing Frank's flirtation with Emma, Jane's physical state deteriorates in Highbury; she suffers not only the mental anguish of fear of losing him, but also jealousy of a rich, healthy rival. After the ill effects of a cold bring Jane to Highbury, her headaches and nervous complaints increase. Mr. Perry the apothecary

being called in shows the family's concern and the financial side of medical attention in that time period. Miss Bates declares Mr. Perry shall be sent for if need be, "The expense shall not be thought of" (162). One wonders exactly how much Mr. Perry charges per visit; Jane must worry over the expense also because, against her consent, the apothecary visits later when she is suffering under "severe headaches and a nervous fever". Mr. Perry declares that Jane's health "seemed for the moment completely deranged…nothing touching the pulmonary complaint, which was the standing apprehension of the family" but he was concerned. Tuberculosis of the lungs is not the cause but a mental suffering, "Her spirits seemed overcome" (389). In today's' medical parlance Jane would be suffering from clinical depression which often exacerbates illnesses occurring from a stressed immune system. In 18th Century parlance Jane Fairfax is suffering from a broken heart, caused by a young man who finally admits, "[I] saw how ill I had made her…her wan sick looks" (443).

The cure for Jane's sickness comes ironically from the death of one who was always supposed to be fancying illness: Mrs. Churchill. The presence of absence is well wrought in the character who never appears center stage but manages the action in the wings through the manipulation of her illnesses. Certainly the picture of illness suggests as troubling a hypochondria as Mr. Woodhouse's. For example she cannot move from the sofa for a week but is prepared to travel two nights on the road (306)--as Mr. Weston expresses it, "I have not much faith in Mrs. Churchill's illnesses" (307). Frank is under her control but suspects the state of her invalidism: "He knew her illnesses; they never occurred but for her own convenience" (258). However when the old martinet does die, it is so convenient for everyone else that all is forgiven. As Emma sagely comments, "[Mrs.Churchill] had never been admitted before to be seriously ill. [Her death] acquitted her of all the fancifulness and all the selfishness of imaginary complaints" (387). Mr. Perry has restored Jane Fairfax; he shall get all the credit, but really it is the young

physician (Frank) from Windsor who effects the cure (454). Mind and body are healed and the young woman will make a suitably healthy wife. Emma of course is always well (421); when her heart is hurt, her Emma's suffering is mental, made even worse when she contemplates Harriet marrying Mr.Knightley and the match was all her own work! Mr.Knightley's proposal heals the suffering and the author succinctly comments on the mind/body split through Mr.Woodhouse's concern for Mr.Knightley's health: "Could he have seen the heart, he would have cared very little for the lungs…"(434). Marriage for Jane Fairfax and Emma heals mind and body.

Jane Austen had developed an idea of the mind/body split in Sense and Sensibility. Marianne's illness develops physically because, as one who epitomizes the role of the heroine representing sensibility, Marianne deliberately goes out into wildness, into long wet grass, in the twilight, and then sits in wet clothes (306). She wills the body to be ill after the shock to her mind of Willoughby's rejection. Her mental breakdown begins with Willoughby avoiding her, publicly humiliating her, and finally destroying her with his return of her letters and a cold announcement of his engagement. The mental deterioration reads like a modern-day case study in clinical depression and finally hysteria. She sits in silence; cares nothing for her appearance; is "almost choked with grief" as she tries to deal with the rejected letters, but "then covering her face with her handkerchief, almost screamed with agony" (182). As Tony Tanner comments, what happens after "Willoughby's incomprehensible cruelty goes beyond the affectations of an emotional girl" (81). Jane Austen is describing real mental anguish and the decline of the mind to will the body to die.

Again in Sontag's terms: the commonwealth of the body is no longer unified. Marianne has all the symptoms of a deadly infection--not simply a cold or even 'flu but possibly diagnosed as diphtheria, or typhus, the infection that had nearly killed Austen herself in 1783 (Austen-Leigh 45). Sontag describes pre-modern medical methods of diagnosis:

INSET

> …illness is described as it is experienced intuitively, as a relation of outside and inside: an interior sensation or something to be discerned on the body's surface, by sight (or just below, by listening, palpating)…In the older era of artisanal diagnoses, being examined produced an immediate verdict, immediate as the physician's wilingness to speak. (AIDS 35)

END

Thus, in Sense and Sensibility, as soon as the apothecary Mr.Harris speaks the word "putrid" disorder, "allowing the word "infection" to pass his lips," immediate results follow--isolation of the infected and removal of vulnerable children (307). Elinor wants further advice when the treatments fail but Mr. Harris insists all will be well and twice simply changes methods. Marianne must fight to live to restore unification to the divided commonwealth. From Mr. Harris's first visit and his diagnosis to the spiking of the fever and Marianne's "every symptom of recovery" (315), the reader is immersed in the reality of illness. There is no romantic or melodramatic rendering of the invalid's suffering but realism and truth in her fight to live and the anguish of those who love her and must watch her near-death struggle.

For this aspect of realism alone the picture of Marianne's illness would be impressive but the effects are even more so and make up the moral of the novel: one learns self-awareness from suffering. This might seem simplistic in our days of recovery from disease, returns from even near-death experiences--it is a given that people do change after life-threatening illnesses. However, in Austen's days when serious sickness more frequently equated death, Marianne's recovery marks a drastic shift from her role as the heroine of sensibility to one of reflection. In a crucial passage to Elinor, Marianne admits, "My illness has made me think--It has given me leisure and calmness for serious recollection"(345). She now sees "imprudence towards herself

and a want of kindness to others…My illness, I well knew, had been entirely brought on by myself, by such negligence of my own health, as I had felt even at the time to be wrong. Had I died,--it would have been self-destruction" (345). The famous Austen harmony after division is restored. Marriage again becomes the healing force, even though modern readers might regret the loss of Marianne's spirit and the submission of her happiness in forming that of Colonel Brandon's (379).

Recognition of the growth to self through surviving illness becomes a thread Austen takes up again in Mansfield Park. A neglected fall and copious drinking (426) brings on.Tom's fever. The illness is described through letters and not as immediately presented as Marianne's but the effect on others is a crucial as on Tom himself. Lady Bertram is perhaps the most febrile of all Austen's debilitated ladies lounging on sofas, but even she must move off the sofa and come to terms with serious real illness when Tom may well die. Lady Bertram writes to Fanny of "poor invalids", and Fanny recognizes that the mother's anxiety is a "sort of playing at being frightened" until she actually sees her son and then even she is shocked and "very much frightened"(427). Fanny longs to be of use back in Mansfield Park, and cannot understand how his two sisters remain in London while the sickness lingers for two weeks (432); "Edmund is all in all" to the invalid" especially when they "become apprehensive for his lungs" (429). Mary Crawford reveals her true rapacious nature when she writes to Fanny eager to hear of Tom's rumored decline and speedy death, even joking about denying the speeding of that death: "…upon my honour, I never bribed a physician in my life"(434). The "cold-hearted ambition" disgusts Fanny and when she tells Edmond much later it helps him recognize finally that it was Tom's illness not renewed love for him that drew her back to him (459). Tom himself "was the better for ever for his illness. He had suffered and he had learned to think…. He became what he ought to be, useful to his father, steady and quiet, and not living merely for himself" (462).

Of all the novels, the last completed, Persuasion, brings balance to the divided commonwealth of the body, and stresses the danger of exercising the will. The novel, started during the first stages of Jane Austen's illness, the first draft finished a year to the day before she dies (Austen-Leighxx111-iv), presents a similar picture of illness resulting in self awareness but seems to add a finality of illness as punishment and a new cautionary note about submission to fate, or God's will rather than one's one. Various modern writers have drawn attention to the close connections between illness, punishment and the will. Perhaps the most crucial comment is that of Schopenhauer quoted by Sontag in Illness as Metaphor: "The will exhibits itself as organized body, and the presence of disease signifies that the will itself is sick"(43). In Persuasion, it seems a very harsh punishment for the strong-willed Louisa that she should suffer a brain fever after her fall from the Cobb, but the older Jane Austen, 41 at the time of writing the novel, perhaps has seen enough of strong-willed girls ruining their lives on a whim. (Mary Crawford for example explains, "I am very strong. Nothing ever fatigues but doing what I do not like" (MP 68)). In Persuasion Louisa needs to have her "brain set to right" in Admiral Croft's term, before she can learn how to be a sailor's wife (171). Wentworth admires the young girl who brags about her determination never to be swayed, always exerting her will to do as she thought right (87-88), and gives an amazing comparison between her happiness and the firmness of a hazelnut that will never be altered (88)--a happiness that Tony Tanner refers to as "a 'nutty' happiness indeed" (233). Once Louisa exerts her will to be jumped down from the stairs on the Cobb crying out, "I am determined I will" (109), she learns, as does Wentworth, that all in aspects of life there should be proportions and limits" (116).

As Austen writes *Persuasion*, her letters show that she is already becoming an invalid, which perhaps explains the poignant representation of the real invalid Mrs. Smith. The writer acknowledges true suffering in the character crippled with rheumatic fever--hardly able to move

from one room to another--and a genuine admiration for the fortitude with which Mrs. Smith bears her affliction (154-5). However, the invalid will admit no romanticizing of the state of invalidism. When visiting her old friend, Anne talks of the sickroom's "disinterested, self-denying attachment, of heroism, fortitude, patience, resignation—of all the sacrifices that ennoble us most" (155-6), but Mrs. Smith paints a far more realistic picture of human nature: "generally speaking it is its weakness and not its strength that appears in a sick chamber; it is selfishness and impatience rather than generosity and fortitude that one hears of" (156). Perhaps Jane Austen is recalling all the invalids she has nursed, especially Henry and Edward, or maybe even prophetically seeing her own invalidism. Caroline Austen describes Jane Austen herself confined in one room, "sitting quite like an invalide in an arm chair…with a general appearance of debility and suffering" (Caroline Austen qtd. in *Family Record* 223). Perhaps Anne's restored bloom, and marriage, and the eventual financial security of Mrs. Smith is the wish fulfillment of a writer who is facing not only aging and spinsterhood but also severe illness.

In her letter to Cassandra, 15 July 1816, Jane can joke about aging: "for *we* do not grow older of course." *Persuasion* is completed 6 August 1816 (Austen Leigh xx1v). By 8-9 September Jane is thanking Cassandra for her concern over her back, and fretting over wanting a few days quiet and freedom from company. She humorously states her frustration over housekeeping restraining her from writing: "Composition seems to me Impossible, with a head full of Joints of Mutton & doses of rhubarb." In the same letter she gives her own diagnosis: "I have an idea that agitation does it as much harm as fatigue, and that I was ill at the time of your going, from the very circumstances of your going." The diagnosis concurs with what we now know about Addison's Disease: stress and mental upset can aggravate the symptoms. A true set back occurs when the Austens receive the news of the loss of their uncle's legacy. In her letter to Charles, 6 April 1817, Jane explains the relapse: "I am the only one of the legatees who has been

so silly, but a weak body must excuse weak nerves." All the last letters trace the development of the disease so clearly with the significant black and white mottled skin, bouts of bilious fever, recovery and hopes for health, to a gradual lack of all strength and mobility. The symptoms were so clearly delineated that Sir Zachary Cope could give his diagnosis on her death date 157 years later (183).

"A poor honey," Jane stops writing *Sanditon* 18 March 1817. As she often does in her letters, she draws comparisons with her writings and the birth of children, writing sadly to Anne Sharp 22 May 1817, "Mrs. F.A. has had a much shorter confinement than I have—with a Baby to produce into the bargain. We were put to bed nearly at the same time, and she has been quite recovered this great while." Austen produces only a fragment of a novel that gives a hint of its brilliance had the writer lived.

In *Sanditon*, wish-fulfillment becomes sheer fun, a burlesque of all things to do with unwellness, as if the writer is thumbing her nose at her own body's failings, recognizing the irony of one who has scoffed at illness and written of the plight of the invalid, now becoming one herself. "Activity run mad" (410), bodies and society all out of balance, the novel mocks the quackery of the age, the urge to build hospitals, sea water cures, doctors' fees and hypochondria. Lady Denham's aversion to doctors perhaps reflects Austen's earlier feelings: "What sh^{d} we do with a doctor here? It w^{d} only be encouraging our Servants and the Poor to fancy themselves ill if there was a doctor at hand…let us have none of the Tribe at Sanditon" (393). Diane Parker's letter to her brother is a tour de force of ailments including "Spasmodic Bile", and cures, "Six leaches a day for ten days together," and three teeth pulled (386-7). Arthur Parker's "enjoyments in Invalidism", his joy in strong cocoa and lashings of butter are funnier than anything Austen writes for her other hypochondriacs (417-18). The novel is one of extremes, even with the healthy: Charlotte expresses coming from "so healthy a family" (388), and Lady Denham, has

lived “70 years in the good world & never took Physic above twice—and never saw the face of a Doctor…” (394). The Austen balance and harmony is ultimately destroyed to reflect the imbalance of the sickened body, a radically divided commonwealth, a society that will increasingly, over the centuries that follow the Eighteenth, indulge in sickness.

NOTES

1. I am using Elizabeth Jenkins’ chronology for the novels: “A good case could be made out for placing *Northanger Abbey* at the head of the list, as the earliest example of a completed work” (63).

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